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### Black Meteorology

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in the Cold War and Vietnam, Howard encourages treating the enemy in a more 'humanized' fashion as a figure with 'fears, perceptions, interests and difficulties all of his [*sic*] own'. Howard is well known as a deeply conservative specimen of the generally conservative tribe of military historians, yet such a comment resonates with Kochi's recognition of otherness and might well hint at a rather conservative use of the idea of precariousness. As well as being a hint as to the fundamental tension in Kochi's work, this potential to rethink the enemy in terms of an ethical other in a variety of political ways is also a useful reminder of the more general danger in all moves from politics to ethics: that an intended political radicalism runs the risk of being turned into an ethical conservatism.

**Mark Neocleous**

## Black meteorology

Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2009. 109 pp., £9.95 pb., 978 1 58435 072 9.

Jonathan Swift's Gulliver first becomes aware of Laputa when it occludes the sun, enveloping him in its strange shadow. The levitating island, kept aloft by means of a magnetic lodestone at its core, is a kind of parodic New Atlantis, an aristocratic society of scientists and their balloon-carrying retainers who are sustained by the tributes of those unfortunate enough to live below. If these are withheld, so Gulliver learns, Laputa will hover above the offending region, turning itself into a climatological weapon that prevents sunlight and rain reaching the ground, thus causing famine and impoverishment below. Fast-forward now to 1996 and we find a Pentagon-produced paper titled 'Weather as Force Multiplier: Owning the Weather in 2025' that envisions a future in which the meteorological milieux of battlezones and enemy territories are shaped, manipulated, and indeed designed to military advantage. Recently there has been much media coverage of geo-engineering proposals put forward as possible responses to climate change, such as those discussed in the just-published report by the Royal Society ('Geo-engineering the Climate: Science, Governance and Uncertainty'). These typically involve scenarios such as the technological production of clouds to reflect solar radiation away from the earth's surface. But it will come as no surprise that projects of weather domination or design serving other interests – and

intended for more Laputa-like habitat or environment destruction – are also well under way.

Laputa's ecological terrorism does not appear in Peter Sloterdijk's short book *Terror from the Air*, although it might well have done. First published in 2002 as *Luftbeben* (literally 'airquake'), the book is marked by 9/11 and its aftermath but is also closely tied to Sloterdijk's extensive and long-standing work on atmospherics (presented in his *Sphären* trilogy). Although Laputa might look like an early-eighteenth-century presentiment of atmoterrorism, Sloterdijk identifies the latter's primal scene in the release of chlorine gas on 22 April 1915 at Ypres, when it was used as a weapon against French-Canadian troops. With this, the hitherto principally ballistic technologies of combat – which implied precise spatial targeting and so, the argument runs, were able to keep alive something of the military honour system predicated upon the struggle of individual protagonists – were transformed in an environmental direction with the effect that the attack on the soldier became in the first instance an attack on the ability of his immediate atmospheric milieu to sustain life. As it is an aerial rather than a punctual weapon, the calculations attendant on the use of gas involved wind speed, direction and concentration, while its immersive enveloping characteristics negated the simple topographical defences of ballistic-era warfare. Defence was no longer a matter of getting below firing lines, but rather of entering a protectively sealed environment, that of the gas mask, which Sloterdijk argues thus represents the Ur-form of air-conditioning, at least in its modern sense as an optimized breathable interior sealed against a malign exterior environment.

For Sloterdijk the gas attack at Ypres marked not just the beginning of atmoterrorism, but also the beginning of the twentieth century itself in so far as what he claims to be the three key features of the era – its 'operative criteria' – were interwoven in it: environmental thinking, product design and terrorism. The use of gas as a weapon supposed and demanded the idea of an environment which it both targeted and contaminated, while the refinement of the properties and performance of both the gas itself and its delivery system was the task of product design, initiating a line of atmotechnic engineering endeavours that the book traces through pesticide production to the gas chambers to the 'air design' of contemporary scented shopping environments in which the atmosphere is literally infused by commodity marketing. Terror and terrorism emerge in the argument in what are claimed to be particularly twentieth-century forms in that they 'pass through a theory of the environment' and are

directed towards it. Yet at the same time, despite this distinction, all terrorism for Sloterdijk will in fact turn out to be environmental or atmoterrorism insofar as what he describes as its 'basic idea' consists in the targeting of the enemy's environment – that is, in the making-dangerous of a milieu. In a general sense one can see the argument that Sloterdijk is trying to make here, but the way in which the concept of terrorism – whatever the book says about its 'precise definition' – is tethered to twentieth-century atmototechnologies seems unduly restricted and limited, and the argument circular.

In Sloterdijk's account, atmoterrorism is predicated upon a constant unfolding or breaking open of latency, whereby previously unseen, unrecognized or concealed 'background' conditions of life become suddenly exposed and problematized. Thus modern technical manipulation comes to extend into atmospheric media, and the prior innocent and unquestioned relation to air is both thematized and becomes the subject of an unhappy and anxious consciousness. Here Sloterdijk, who relates Being-in-the-world to Being-in-the-air, parallels Heidegger's 'absence of homeland' (*Heimatlosigkeit*) to the denaturalization of air and the loss of its tutelage.

Research and development driven by atmoterroristic interests result in what the book describes as a 'black meteorology' under whose pressure air and atmosphere become for the first time, Sloterdijk suggests, topics of explicit consideration for a range of concerns from aesthetics to politics to medicine and beyond. But the argument seems much too tightly drawn at this point and many of the historical complexities, which Sloterdijk at other times seems to acknowledge, are sacrificed to an overly insistent epochal rhetoric. Air, atmosphere and, indeed, breathing, have an ancient, intricate and manifest cultural history. Counter-examples flood in here: one thinks, for instance, of the miasma theory of disease, which presumed that contagion was carried by foul air; or of the Pneumatic Institution, established to investigate the therapeutic effects of gases, whose 'chemical superintendent' after 1798, Humphrey Davy, had his friends – including Samuel Taylor Coleridge – experiment with the inhalation of nitrous oxide; or of the atmospheric preoccupations of Ruskin's work, such as the pneumatological aesthetics of his idiosyncratic study of the Athena myth, 'Queen of the Air', or his late lectures on 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century'. It is hard to see how any of these cases can be comfortably related to the terroristic model set out in the book. Likewise, encounters with dangerous and unbreathable milieux led to examples of air-

conditioning's encapsulative principle earlier than the gas-mask – Cornelis Drebbel's submarine, for instance, which was to be seen on the Thames in the early 1620s and on which James I apparently travelled. That said, something of the sub-marine does, however, surface in Sloterdijk's wry account of Salvador Dalí's 1936 lecture at the New Burlington Galleries in London. To give this he appeared, as an 'ambassador from the depths' (of the unconscious), dressed in a deep-sea diving suit in which – to great effect upon the audience and to Dalí's subsequent delight – he was nearly asphyxiated.

Embedded in this book is a call for a meteorological turn in cultural theory in response to the challenges posed by the fast-accumulating developments in atmospherics that have thus far outpaced it. As atmosphere becomes an ever-increasing preoccupation of culture – as a source of anxiety and thing to be modified, and thus subjectivized, by means of design – so it becomes a leitmotif of its interpretation: as Sloterdijk writes, 'Cultures are collective conditions of immersion in air and sign systems.' Certainly there can be no doubt that the politics, production and stabilization of atmospheres will be key issues and pressure points of the immediate future, and Sloterdijk's often brilliantly elaborated reflections provide crucial philosophical resources for thinking about them. The atmospheric and weather-mediating aspirations of earlier visionary projects – such as Buckminster Fuller's proposal to cover midtown Manhattan with a geodesic dome – have been subject to extraordinary escalations of scale and degree. On the one hand we have the expansion into climate design and engineering at the level of the planet, and on the other we have a kind of hyperbolic intensification of air-conditioning that results in a radical differential between adjacent conditions that is itself produced as a consumer attraction: recent development proposals in the Gulf provide exemplary cases of this – Dubai's 'Sunny Mountain Ski Dome', which, although now on hold, was to contain an artificial mountain range and a revolving ski-slope together with other, as the official website puts it, 'Arctic experiences'; or the 'Hydropolis' underwater hotel with its bubble-shaped suites, also planned for Dubai. At the same time there appears across broad and diverse areas of cultural production to be a drive towards ever more immersive – and in this sense atmospheric – forms, a movement supported and promoted by contemporary technologies of representation such as high-definition television or the innovative 3-D system used by James Cameron in his soon-to-be-released film *Avatar*. Typically descriptions of what audiences can expect change

to imply participation rather than spectatorship: that is, being inside something that, in turn, is characteristically described as 'another world'.

While the importance of the study of culturally produced atmospheres and their implications (their conditions of production, the way they are sustained, their effects, and so on) to which Sloterdijk directs us is, I think, incontrovertible; what I understand to be the other side of his cultural meteorology, which would be the atmospheric interpretation of culture, seems to me to raise some questions. Specifically, I wonder to what extent the atmospheric trope or thought-image – no matter how broken down into 'atmospheric multiplicities' it becomes – builds-in in advance a tendency towards interpretive totalization and closure in so far as it will always involve ideas of envelopment. Gaps, fractures, breaks, slippages or destructurings tend not to be part of the language of atmospheres. Sloterdijk's characterization of cultures as conditions of immersion can make them sound akin to encapsulated and air-conditioned entities. While this may be an appropriate diagnosis of the contemporary cultural condition, at the same time it can also look like a result of the theoretical model itself.

Mark Dorrian

## Prison notebooks

Jeremy Till, *Architecture Depends*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2009. 232 pp., £16.95 hb., 978 0 26201 253 9.

The 1891 introduction of the Architect's Registration Bill to the House of Commons sparked a debate in *The Times* over the merit of that profession's regulation. Asking would-be architects to pass examinations and secure assurances that they would follow a code of professional conduct offered the public a safeguard from a range of unscrupulous behaviours not unknown, then as now, among the construction sector's more artful and inventive members. The counter-argument was one that called for a form of public criticism, as opposed to institutional governance, by means of which architects would speak openly about the work of other architects, thereby regulating the work of poor architects through a series of more-or-less natural exclusions. Bad architecture would be named as such, and an informed public would be better aware of the terms under which architects judged the work of their peers; good architecture would be met with public

praise framed by the didactic mission of educating the citizenry. Strong criticism and open discussion would offer a more transparent and organic form of control than the rules of any governing body could enforce.

As attractive as the latter option may sound, as we know, or can surmise, the Bill passed (see Deborah van der Plaats's essay 'Architectural Ignorance and Public Indifference', *Fabrications* 2009). Architecture followed the path of legislated professionalization alongside medicine and the law, and this gave rise to many of the conditions in contemporary architecture against which Jeremy Till rails. *Architecture Depends* is an impassioned and very personal plea for a culture of contingency in architecture: an architecture of soft disciplinary and professional edges, of social and civil relevance, of technical and ecological common sense, of breakable habits and disposable heroes. Till's architecture is a practice informed by conditions in the world that have little if anything to do with the things that architects have been taught to think about by schools and tradition. He rightly resists describing what that practice (or education) might look like, but I'd be surprised if his own work as an architect and educator did not somehow model this contingent architecture.

I have never heard Till speak, but I can imagine that reading *Architecture Depends* is a little like following his lectures. He writes as if for a crowded room. Before an audience bewildered by the problem of how contemporary architecture came to be what it is, he unpacks his library (which includes a good number of books by Zygmunt Bauman alongside the classics) to demonstrate how little architecture understands its place in the world, and how much it would benefit from opening the doors wide to that knowledge of society and politics that it systematically overlooks or defiantly – to borrow Till's tone – sets aside. In its own way (and this book is super-idiosyncratic along the lines of, for example, Paul Shephard's meditations on architectural themes), Till's volume contributes to the current wave of literature reflecting on the conditions of architecture's claims on disciplinary or artistic autonomy and the conditions under which that autonomy is undermined. Like many of those books and articles, especially of the critical/post-critical debate, it returns us to the 1970s. Till does not do this explicitly, but his target is the same monumental legacy of modernism against which postmodernism set itself; his criticisms are levelled at a monolithic legacy of Vitruvian order; and his discomfort is with the perpetuation of a model of architectural education and practice that survived unscathed from the nineteenth century – indeed, which